

A CRISIS OF THE UNIVERSITY?

Nowadays, one can hear numerous opinions declaring a crisis of the university. As Jaroslav Pelikan observed, diagnosing problems of the university had become a kind of domestic sport or family business.⁷ The discussions usually focus on the university not fulfilling its main function: some say that it does not prepare specialists to meet the needs of the market, others claim that it does not educate a critically thinking citizen.

A critique of the contemporary university is presented also in Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*. The author's principal claim is that the dominating model is, at present, that of the university of excellence. This model has brought to ruin the previous one, that of the university of culture, identified with the Humboldtian university. The cause for that transformation was a decrease in the role of the national state, which has made culture, understood as the symbolic and political equivalent of integration, lose its value. Therefore, university as the main institution of national culture in the national state has been subject to transformation. As a result, the idea of culture has been replaced by that of excellence and the university succumbs to the logic of consumption. As Bill Readings writes, students of a university of excellence are not *like* consumers: they *are*, in fact, consumers.⁸ In other words, universities are similar to companies in that they provide services to their clients; in this case they are educational services. According to Readings, the university is transforming into a transnational bureaucratic corporation. Professors (who are simultaneously lecturers and scholars) are no longer central figures in their universities, since the central place has been given to the rectors, to whom all the other members of the academia are liable.

Readings's book contains several proposals of how the idea of the university should be renewed. One of his ideas, which may be called conservative, suggests seeking possibilities to enter into a new agreement with the national state; the problem is, however, that the national state, as it was understood in 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, no longer exists. Another suggestion is that a new idea of the university should be invented. Such an attempt,

⁷ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁸ See Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 27.

however, might also prove ineffective; for instance, the idea of excellence has led to a crisis of the university rather than resolved the existing one.

Readings proposes a new logic of the development of the university. He calls it the logic of institutional pragmatism which rests on the belief that, nowadays, the university needs to reject the views, characteristic of the previous epochs, including the Age of Enlightenment, which posed it as an ideal community which is not subject to change. According to Readings, the university should be open, inclusive, and flexible in relation to those whom it serves and continue the tradition of “being together,”⁹ which emerged as part of its essence.

It should be said, however, that the concept of the university as a space in which different ideas may be developed and confronted is not new. Such a possibility is inherent in the academic tradition from the beginning of universities, which have always embraced mutually opposed currents of thought and various realities. This characteristic is particularly conspicuous in the case of the contemporary university, which combines universalism, or egalitarianism, of research and an administrative hierarchy; applied knowledge and pure knowledge; the academia as such and the particular areas of scholarship. This diversity results in a multiplicity of debates and a variety of concepts. The mission of the university makes it possible for the followers of the opposing standpoints to rationally defend their ideas. Alasdair MacIntyre writes precisely in this vein: “Universities are places where conceptions of and standards of rational justification are elaborated, put to work in detailed practices of enquiry, and themselves rationally evaluated, so that only from the university can the wider society learn how to conduct its own debates, practical or theoretical, in a rationally defensible way. But that claim itself can be plausibly advanced only insofar as the university is a place where rival and antagonistic views of rational justification, such as those of genealogists and Thomists, are afforded the opportunity both to develop their own enquiries, in practice and in the articulation of the theory of that practice, and to conduct their intellectual and moral warfare.”